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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANJUL 000439

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/12/2016  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KMCA](#) [UNSC](#) [GA](#) [IR](#) [VE](#) [GT](#)  
SUBJECT: THE GAMBIA: REACHING OUT TO VENEZUELA, IRAN

REF: A. STATE 101248  
[1](#)B. BANJUL 386 ET AL  
[1](#)C. BANJUL 396 (ALL NOTAL)

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOSEPH STAFFORD, REASON 1.4 (B AND D)

SUMMARY

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[1](#)1. (C) Prominent journalist and Embassy contact portrayed President Jammeh's invitation to Venezuelan and Iranian leaders to recent African Union Summit here as a swipe at the U.S. following the suspension of The Gambia's MCA eligibility. According to our source, Chavez actively lobbied Summit delegations on behalf of Venezuela's UNSC candidacy, offering oil-related economic blandishments in return for votes. Jammeh's reaching out to Venezuela and Iran -- two countries with which The Gambia has had minimal ties in recent years -- serves as a troubling reminder of his capacity for erratic, impulsive behavior. END SUMMARY.

PRESIDENT JAMMEH'S ANGRY REACTION

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[1](#)2. (C) In July 12 discussion with Ambassador, prominent journalist (editor-in-chief of local daily, "The Point" and veteran Reuters stringer), Pap Saine, asserted that "without doubt" President Yahya Jammeh had invited the Venezuelan and Iranian leaders to the July 1-2 African Union Summit here in angry reaction to the recent suspension of The Gambia's eligibility for the Millennium Challenge Account (MCA) program (refs a and b). Saine expressed certainty that the invitations to the two leaders were Jammeh's personal initiative, not that of the AU leadership. Citing sources in the GOTG as well as the Venezuelan and Iranian Summit delegations, he said that, Jammeh, in separate side meetings with Chavez and Ahmadinejad, had made clear his resentment at the U.S. over the MCA suspension.

[1](#)3. (C) Jammeh reportedly told the pair that he wanted to strengthen ties with Venezuela and Iran, stating that he was reaching out to them as "friends" who, unlike the U.S., did not "impose conditions" on their cooperation with The Gambia. According to Saine, Jammeh accepted Ahmadinejad's invitation to visit Tehran, adding that the visit would likely occur within the next few months. Saine said Jammeh made a pitch to both visitors for assistance to help cover the costs of the national (Presidential and National Assembly) elections scheduled here in September 2006 and January 2007; Saine did not know how Chavez and Ahmadinejad had responded to the request. (COMMENT: We note Iranian media reports that, on margins of the Summit, the GOTG and

GOI signed three memoranda of understanding to bolster economic cooperation in various fields. END COMMENT)

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VENEZUELAN LOBBYING ON UNSC CANDIDACY  
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14. (C) Saine stated that on the margins of the AU Summit Chavez had lobbied extensively on behalf of Venezuela's UNSC candidacy, noting that he had met with numerous AU member states' delegations. Based on readouts from delegations, Saine gathered that in his approaches, Chavez had offered economic blandishments centered on Venezuela's oil resources (e.g., concessionary sales terms, barter arrangements) in return for support in the voting for the UNSC seat. Saine judged that the GOTG had already pledged its support for Venezuela and that Chavez may well have garnered pledges of support from some other AU member states as well during his lobbying campaign here -- although Saine said he could not confirm such pledges from specific countries. In response to Ambassador's question, Saine said he had not been aware that an Ambassadorial-level Guatemalan rep had been on hand for the Summit.

COMMENT  
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15. (C) Saine's assertions of Jammeh's reaching out to Venezuela and Iran in an anti-U.S. reaction to the suspension of MCA eligibility are plausible and serve as a troubling reminder of the rough-hewn Gambian leader's penchant for erratic, impulsive actions -- as also evident of late in the GOTG's declining performance on human rights (ref c). Saine's remarks add to our sense of skepticism over pro-forma assurances from GOTG officials that the presence of the Venezuelan and Iranian leaders at the Summit should be seen strictly as part of the GOTG's effort, as it seeks to develop its hoped-for oil resources, to elicit the assistance of two

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key oil producing states. To be sure, we believe that the Gambia's solicitation of oil-related cooperation is indeed a factor in its courting of Venezuela and Iran, but the possibility that such courting signals the beginning of a worrisome shift away from the moderate foreign policy adopted by Jammeh in recent years cannot be ruled out. END COMMENT.  
STAFFORD